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Communist-built Industrial Towns, the History of Newly Built Towns and Cities

Distinctive Historical Development Paths of Hungarian 'Socialist' and Western European Industrial Towns in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century



Abstract In my study, I intend to give a brief overview of the development of Hungarian communist built and Western-European industrial towns. What makes this topic worthwhile for exploration is that towns currently experience a number of core changes in their fabric. Naturally, these stem from their history, which in turn affects the current urban development schemes, the landscape of towns, and modifications in spatial arrangements. Another important aspect is that substantial variations are observable between the Western European and the Hungarian urban development models. On the one hand, past development policies reflected the economic and political realities of each country, which was further coupled with the east-west divide, thus impacting development priorities. As a consequence, there are still clear divergences among the countries surveyed despite the current trend toward more uniformity in urban development goals.. The article provides a detailed analysis of the various models, emphasizing peculiarities and specific features. It aims to establish viable forms for spontaneous and micro-managed paths of urban development.

Keywords urban development, industrial towns, Eastern and Western urban development models, spatial and urban development, communist industrial development

DOI 10.14232/belv.2015.1.3 <http://dx.doi.org/10.14232/belv.2015.1.3>

Cikkre való hivatkozás / How to cite this article:

Laki, Ildikó: (2015): Communist-built Industrial Towns, the History of Newly Built Towns and Cities. Belvedere Meridionale vol. 27. no. 1. 38–47. pp

ISSN 1419-0222 (print)

ISSN 2064-5929 (online, pdf)

The generally accepted theory of the stages of urban development was first elaborated by the so-called Dutch school (Klaassen, Paelinck, van den Berg) in 1981. According to this thesis, the development of urban regions can be broken down into a number of stages in which population does not evolve in a haphazard way but rather, especially in developed countries, follows a general pattern. The stages encompass *urbanisation* with rising core city populations, *suburbanisation* with the development of suburban regions surrounding the core city, *disurbanization* whereby rural areas experience higher population gains, and *reurbanization* with a significant rebound in the population of the core city.

György Enyedi, an economist and geographer, supplemented the general urban development theory on two points. He provides an alternative reading of the fourth stage by claiming that there are no actual population gains in the reurbanization stage, rather an alteration in the pattern of urban space takes place. (ENYEDI 2011.) Furthermore, he argues that the shift from one stage to the other is triggered by long-term economic cycles, the Kondratiev waves.

A brief survey of the development of Western European industrial towns

During history, even prior to the 20th century, there were numerous examples in Europe of the planning and subsequent foundations of entire towns or new sections of existing ones. It is not accidental that politics always played an integral part in the decisions related to urban development; however, it was during the historical developments of the 20th-century Europe which elevated political ideologies to a distinguished position in the foundation and life of newly established towns.

From the 1930s, but especially from the beginning of the 50s both in Western and Eastern Europe the wave of newly established towns in essence created new urban centres all across the continent and rearranged the settlement patterns of individual countries to some extent. Following World War II on both sides of the divided continent, new towns were founded, but generally speaking all of them in their spatial design, functional and structural makeup followed and adapted to their physical, spatial surroundings. In Western Europe, newly built towns primarily appeared in the outlying metropolitan areas of large urban centres and secondarily in well-established but resurging industrial areas. In Eastern, Central-Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe communist industrial development carved out a prominent role for the newly established towns in industrial regions, mining areas, and transport centres. Simultaneously, the planning of towns with commercial (industrial) and residential functions in the vicinity of large urban centres with already existing industrial capacities served the pre-determined goal of industrial development, so there were rarely spontaneous suburbanization. (UZZOLI 2013.)

Forced industrialization from the beginning of the 1950s had a tremendous impact on Central-Eastern European countries. The first phase in this process was the extensive development of heavy industry. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the industrial development of Central-Eastern Europe did not simply mean the slavish copying of the Soviet example; still analogous patterns prevailed as in the case of the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 30s when the *developed capitalist countries* tried to strangle her economically (ENYEDI 1978.).

For the first phase of industrialization to be successful several factors had to be in place. The rapid pace of progress indicates that the entire economic potential of Central-Eastern Europe was allotted to this task. The resulting dominance of heavy industry, especially the energy sector and the steel industry in Czechoslovakia and Hungary was unmistakable, yet, in parallel, the traditional chemical industries also strengthened during this period.

The rapid growth of heavy industry required major development projects, which was accomplished at the expense of other industries. There was also an additional need for labour, mainly recruited from unskilled agricultural workers departing the country for the cities and for a new life. In the selection of the location of an industrial enterprise, accessibility for transportation was traditionally an important precondition. In the case of the resource-poor Central-Eastern European countries, this meant positioning the new industrial facilities near major transport arteries, e.g. the placement of the Romanian and Hungarian steel mills along the Danube. (ENYEDI 1978.) The heavily politicized nature of industrialization similarly led to industrial development projects in the backward agricultural areas and to an increase in the number of industrial workers.

The composition of the labour force underwent radical changes with employment in agriculture being increasingly supplanted by industry-related jobs. The migration of rural populations into urban areas accelerated, thus the proportion of urban populations on the planet doubled in half a century from 19.4% in 1920 to 38.4% in 1970. In Western Europe already 70% of the population lived in cities by this time. (PERÉNYI 1978.)

The chief characteristics of communist urban development consists of strong state intervention in spatial and urban development; forced development schemes and limited actual urbanization and slow pace of growth in the existing urban areas. The prime motive in the establishment of new towns was the industrialization of predominantly rural areas and for that end the new urban centres became the key beneficiaries of state funding allocations. The state economic policies guaranteed the privileges of the status of towns to the new settlements, which as showcases enjoyed extra funding and opportunities through regular economic planning and special development programmes. In most cases, medium-sized towns built around a single factory or industry were representative examples of communist development aims and spatial development programmes. (GERMUSKA 2002, 2004.) The forced communist urbanization schemes generated this unique type of urban settlements, which continue to exist and function to this very day. (UZZOLI 2013.)

Naturally, each country exhibited its particular form of urban development. The results were diverse depending on economic conditions and opportunities, and the socio-political agendas set. Following World War I with the creation of the Soviet Union and after World War II with the emergence of communist satellite countries, the social achievements and the political maturity exhibited by the working class demanded greater attention from the governments in the west in affordable housing policies, utilities and infrastructure improvements, as well as in local public transport development.

The primary purpose of the construction of new towns was to neutralize the damage caused by the destruction of World War II. Some European countries, e.g. the Federal Republic of Germany and France, suffered considerable destruction. At the same time, reconstruction heavily impacted the theory and practice of urban planning and construction. Besides the elimination of war damage, the need to build adequate housing and the commencement of infrastructure development projects were also of high priority.

The construction of new towns began mainly in the form of residential or satellite towns of large urban centres. In the newly developed industrial regions, new industrial towns developed, while already existing industrial areas maintained their often unhealthy and cramped living environment. At this time, the concentration of industry and population created large urban agglomerations increasing challenges. Concomitantly, the expansion of road and transporta-

tion systems had its downside as well, since new road networks and hubs were created radically altering the existing relations among settlements. As a general rule, it can be stated that the faster the speed of urbanization was, the less advanced a country had previously been. Among Eastern European cities, fitting examples for rapid reconstruction and growth are Warsaw and Gdynia-Gdansk in Poland, Berlin, Dresden, and Rostock in East Germany; while in the west Birmingham and Coventry in the United Kingdom, and Cologne, Hamburg, Frankfurt-am-Main in West Germany can be named. The reconstruction of towns and the definition of the principles for building entirely new towns or sections can be approached from multiple angles; firstly from the concentration and strengthening cooperation among plants and factories scattered within city limits, secondly from the revitalization or demolition of obsolete living areas and the construction of modern multi-purpose residential zones, and thirdly from the building of new urban industrial and commercial zones. (UZZOLI 2013.)

In addition to reconstruction, the emergence of entirely new communist-built towns also played a significant role. Despite the common misconception, the new communist-built towns played a limited albeit significant role in the post 1945 urbanization of Central-Eastern Europe. (HAMILTON 1979.) In reality, very few genuinely newly founded towns were built during the communist era. Rather, the majority was constructed through hurried development or merger of already existing settlements, mainly villages, such as Tatabánya, Kazinbarcika, Tychy, and Nova Dubcina. Although the general assumption is that these towns owe their existence to heavy industrial functions, often their *raison d'être* was merely to alleviate the congestion of large cities by being constructed on their peripheries as purely residential settlements, e.g. Petrzalka next to Bratislava, Halle-Neustadt, Rostock-Lütten-Klein, and New Belgrade. (KOVÁCS 2008.) The advent of Soviet-style socialism offered new horizons in urban development, as it could become a consciously executed effort based on all encompassing objective analyses. Prior to World War II, urban development was simply the spontaneous fulfilment of a collection of ad hoc needs; during the communist era carefully executed regional planning schemes covering the entire country established the time, place, and budgetary requirements needed for the realization of every new project. Therefore, it became essential to prepare in every case a thorough economic, geographical, social, and technical feasibility survey. Essentially it was the conclusions thereby gained which delineated the directions of urban development schemes in the country. (RADOS 1975.)

Functionality and ideological consistency also manifested in the architecture and urban development planning of the new towns. The town centres with their public functions, the factories and productions plants, and the residential districts consisting of prefabricated blocks of flats were designed to be separate units. (ALEKSANDROWICZ 1999.) In their design the examples of Soviet style architectural philosophy appeared, which originally derived its inspiration from Western European urban planning and development theories. Although residential districts were distinct from industrial zones; however, the green belts often separating the various functional units were either not planned at all or insufficient attention was paid to them. The level of infrastructure and public services, as well as the service sector usually took roughly ten years after the establishment of the new town to reach the degree of sophistication that is suitable for a genuine urban settlement. (UZZOLI 2013.)

When referring to urbanization in former communist countries, it is a question of open debate whether urban development in these countries had some uniquely peculiar features. Many expert believe that the distinctly communist-built towns are not more than industrial

complexes with residential units housing the necessary labour force and were devoid of any genuine features of urbanization. ENYEDI(1988) claims that no significant changes occurred in these towns during the decades of communist rule. The towns simply evolved into liveable living environments which functioned simultaneously as places of employment and residence, and for each, given its socio-economic status, as the venue for suitable leisure activities. Due to the lopsided development of the fifties in the following decade, complex social-economic challenges surfaced. This was partially because of the newly created towns and their lack of proper urbanization as seen in the quality and number of residences, in infrastructure development, in services, and shortage of consumer goods available for the public. By time it became obvious that the labour market was unevenly tilted toward heavy industry which affected the whole economy negatively. The first signs of the gradual devolution of the Hungarian rustbelt were appearing in the sixties; a decade later it became an obvious reality with the emergence of attendant unemployment in industrial regions. (SYKORA 2009.) To mitigate the negative impact of the latter, job creation in the public services sector, education, municipal administration, and commerce could have been a possible solution; however, in many affected localities either not at all or only after a considerable time lapse did such a shift take place, mainly because of a shortage of funds to finance such employment initiatives. Nevertheless, from the sixties onwards, especially in the chemical industry, a qualified modernization had occurred, which strengthened the industrial emphasis of the newly built towns as well.

During the decades of communism in the settlement hierarchies of Central-Eastern and South-eastern Europe, newly built towns with a specific industrial purpose existed in parallel, e.g. the East German StalinStadt, from 1961 Eisenhüttenstadt, the Polish Nowa Huta, the Bulgarian Dimitrovgrad and Kremikovci, newly built towns with industrial and/or residential functions constructed in the vicinity of existing large or medium-sized industrial cities, e.g. the Polish Nowe Tychy, and the Slovakian Nova Dubnica, as well as heavy industrial centres built with the expansion of already existing smaller settlements with an industrial focus, e.g. the Czech Kunčice and Vitkovice. It should be emphasized that it is often difficult to differentiate the clearly greenfield investment from the urban development projects; therefore a number of overlaps are discernible in this part of Europe. (BARTA 2010).

Following World War II, similar to Central-Eastern Europe, in South-eastern Europe urbanization had also speeded up reaching its apex by the end of the fifties. Communist industrialization, the establishment of new factories with connected development projects all accelerated migration into urban areas. Population growth and the transformation of the nature and functions of localities lead to a modification in the designation of settlement types. In Serbia fifteen (Jesenice, Krani, Titovo Velenje, Borovo, Zenica, Valjevo, Majdanpek, Titovo Uzice, Priboj, Bor, Vranje, Niksic, Titov Vales, Stip, and Kocani) and in Albania four (Elbasan, Qytety Stalin, Ballsh, and Memaliaj) newly built communist towns were founded. The majority of these are mining towns or centres of steel industry. It must be noted that they were not entirely newly built towns, as they had already existed as small settlements from the Middle Ages, but with rapid industrialization they expanded to towns of tens of thousands of inhabitants and became major industrial centres. (FARAGÓ L. – RÁCZSZ. 2010. – quoted in UZZOLI 2013.)

The radical social and economic transformations caused by the regime change in Eastern Europe found the newly built towns unprepared, usually lacking any binding customs and traditions. Upon the collapse of the soviet style communist social and economic system, it became manifest that they were inferior in innovativeness and less suitable to react effectively,

flexibly, and successfully to global challenges and the ensuing severe competition. From the 1980s, it became increasingly obvious that the artificial communist built industrial towns faced a multitude of deteriorating social, socio-economic, and environmental issues. Adapting to the global challenges from the beginning of the 1990s brought forward a new set of inequalities, although signs of their emergence had become apparent from the seventies onwards. High rates of unemployment, superfluous but fragmented heavy industrial production capacities, obsolete technologies, underdeveloped infrastructure, and the enormous scale of environmental pollution even today adversely impact the post-communist newly built towns as spatially manifesting social problems. Partly the causes but also the consequences of the socio-economic problems are a number of demographic processes and phenomena. Subsequent to the regime change, both in a political and economic sense, in many of these towns the flight of active age populations, population aging, and the resulting population loss occurred on a dramatic scale, unfavourably affecting their mid- and long-term development prospects. (UZZOLI 2013.)

A brief history of industrial towns in Hungary from the 1950s until the regime change

In the communist era, the so-called socialist town was one of the last architectural utopias of the 20th century. Originally it was designed to be the ideal urban space for the workers and at the same time a potent symbol of the new society under construction. During the Stalinist period, the 'socialist' town became a rigid system of dogmatic planning formulas. With the gradual erosion of communist orthodoxy, the stiff architectural planning regulations also eased. By the 1970s-80s, the idea of the 'socialist' town became an empty shell and existed merely as a vague collection of preconceived solutions for urban planning. (GERMUSKA 2004.)

In the creation of the communist industrial towns a primary role was played by the post-World War II social-economic and political processes. In one respect, this generated a level of dependency, while on the other it generated new economic, social, and political venues which influenced the landscape in some parts of Hungary fundamentally.

The first generally accepted settlement hierarchy of this country was laid down in György Markos's book *Economic geography of Hungary*. The author emphasized that in the definition of the status of a settlement not only its current, but also its inherited functions must be taken into account, such as population size, the particular historical development traits, spatial characteristics, and the pace of former growth. Nevertheless, it was the contemporary functions which served as the principal basis of qualification of the various types of towns; these were classified as administrative centres, transportation hubs, industrial towns, and agricultural towns. (GERMUSKA 2004.)

In Markos's hierarchy, the new communist-built industrial towns appear as an independent subgroup and include the towns of Ajka, Dunaújváros, Komló, Kazincbarcika, Oroszlány, and Várpalota. He sees these settlements as the products of the planned economies of people's democracies. Barta believes (BARTA 2010) that the new towns built during the communist era do not deserve to be called even 'socialist.' Although they have no precursors and considerably diverge from previously existing towns in their social, economic, and architectural characteristics, they do not possess any attributes to be socialist in essence.

Weclawowitz in his work *The Socio-spatial structure of towns in Eastern Europe* (1992) states that there is no universally accepted definition of what constitutes a 'socialist' town. In his opinion, socialism in the classical sense had not existed in any of the Eastern European countries in the preceding decades of communist rule. All definitions of 'socialist' towns can be grouped

around two basic principles or preconceptions. The first analyzes the planning of these towns and the principles to be applied in the construction of a 'socialist' town. The second is based on a wide array of analytical analyses of post-war urban development. (WECLAWOWITZ 1992.)

One common aspect of the definitions is that the notions of socialist and industrial towns are intertwined in both. The already established and especially the large-sized settlements could not be easily adapted or moulded to fit the ideological needs of the communist regime; whereas the new industrial towns were viewed as the prototypes of the future, as truly 'socialist' towns. (WECLAWOWITZ 1992.)

Pierre Merlin in his *New towns and European Spatial Development* identifies three types of new towns. His thesis distinguishes the newly established capital cities such as Canberra, Brasilia, Islamabad, the new industrial towns, the majority of which were located in the former Soviet Union and Eastern European satellite countries, i.e. Poland, Hungary etc., and a few so-called company towns, set up by corporations in northern Canada and France. These latter settlements were created by industrial development in formerly rural regions and most often were centred on a single large industrial plant or complex. Additionally, he also distinguishes those planned newly built towns which were established most frequently in the vicinity of large urban centres to alleviate their overcrowding, and to transform existing structures. Pál Beluszky considers industrial towns as distinct settlement types. He also identifies three subgroups in his study. He recognizes 'socialist' industrial towns, e.g. Dunaújváros, Ajka, Kazincbarcika, Komló, Tiszaújváros, Várpalota, Oroszlány, and Martfű, classical industrial towns, e.g. Ózd, Paks, Nyergesújfalu, Simontornya, and Tégls, as well as industrial towns with a residential function, e.g. Bonyhád, Mór, Dorog, Százhalombatta, Bányaterenye, Tolna, Sajószentpéter, and Lőrinci. (BELUSZKY 1999.) In Györgyi Barta's study *The twofold interpretation of the 'socialist' town definition* the 'socialist' town registers as a complex socio-economic entity which poses an unsolvable divide among the various employment groups. From the *economic point of view* the large state-owned industrial enterprises were at the focus of communist development policies and as such often played a distinguished role in the life of a particular town or even region. The top management of such state corporations also became notable and influential figures in the town itself and they had an unofficial, but explicit authority in its administration. The peculiar economic system and town structure, but mainly the general social fabric of communist societies was what gave the specific character to the *populace* of the 'socialist' towns. In such towns, stratification and segregation among different segments of the public did not materialize; in the local communities the labour market was dominated by technical and engineering professions both in the white and blue collar jobs, whereas humanities were of marginal importance.

Finally, the last definition pertaining to industrial towns is focusing on their economic prowess by defining them as localities where the majority of the population is being employed in industrial enterprises established specifically there. (TÉRPORTFOGALOMTÁR 2011.)

In Hungary, industrialization and industrial development commenced with substantial delay compared to Western European countries, in reality it started only in the first half of the 19th century. From the 1830s and 40s, politics was an important factor in industrialization, as it served as a tool in the struggle for political and economic independence of the country. (KŐSZEGFALVY 1978.) By reviewing the progress of the pre-1945 industrial development in Hungary, it can be concluded that despite some remarkable successes, the country remained industrially underdeveloped. By 1950, the communist regime commanded the rapid industrialization of the country following preordained 5-year plans, which in theory aimed to eliminate the inherited backward-

ness of the country and instigate comprehensive economic development with a primary focus on industry. In the first decades of communism, the emphasis was placed on the development of heavy industry, especially on industries directly linked with the extraction and processing of natural resources available domestically, such as mining and steel manufacturing. (Kocsis – SCWEITZER 2011.) Forced economic development, especially industrialization with mining, energy, heavy, and armaments industries, were in the centre of the economic policy of the communist regime. With this unbalanced development, within the scope of the first 5-year plan, between 1951 and 1955 industrial production was raised by 130% and a rapid shift occurred in the employment structure. The majority of municipal development projects targeted the urban areas, during this period the level of public services had markedly increased in urban areas and large-sized villages. (KOC SIS–SCWEITZER 2011.)

In Hungary, it became a prime task in the building of the new communist social system to bring to an end the unbalanced nature of productive capacities available in the country by utilizing the advantages offered by a planned economic model. New industrial plants were founded, new high capacity coal and oil powered power plants were built, and the productive use of the natural gas deposits began. *By 1968 industrial production more than quintupled and the national income more than tripled compared to the pre-World War II levels.* The employment structure of the population also underwent dramatic changes; with the rapid growth in the number of industrial workers, the country's obsolescence in productive capacities was ameliorated. In the first wave of communist industrialization, from 1947 to 1954, the industrialization of the thus far neglected parts of the country began. The forced industrialization increased manifold the energy needs of the economy, which also entailed the sometimes unsound expansion and exploration of poor quality coal and lignite mines, such mining towns are Oroszlány, Komló, Ajka, and Várpalota, and the construction of a new oil powered power plant and refinery at Százhalombatta based on the newly discovered oil deposits. Of key importance were the towns of Kazincbarcika and Dunaújváros, the latter in addition to the power plant built for the iron and steel smelters also gave home to building material manufacturers and light industries. The communist-built industrial towns in some fields showed marked differences in comparison with the traditional or other types of industrial towns. The historian Pál Gemuskain analysis of this phenomenon gathered five unique features of the 'socialist' industrial towns.

The **first** and perhaps foremost, which was inspired by the ideas Iván Szelényi, is that communist-built towns were favoured politically in general and by the state's economic policies in particular and as such were the preferred recipients of the state redistribution system. This preferential status can be deduced from the designation of such settlements without exception as towns and in the generous allocation of funds in med-term economic plans and in regional as well as urban development programmes.

The **second** characteristic is that the primary purpose in the foundation of communist-built towns was the industrial development of mainly rural areas. (GERMUSKA 2002a.) In most cases, this entailed the establishment of a new industry or large industrial enterprise, which functioned as the primary employer of the local labour force guaranteeing long-term employment.

The **third** main feature is that in the communist-built towns' industry was always the main source of employment or roughly of 60% of the active working population. (GERMUSKA 2002a.) In the various settlements extensive relocations occurred only where industrialization and industrial presence had no legacy. In the specific town under examination the employment structure visibly tilted towards industry, and in accordance by 1972 73.5% of the labour force

was employed in the industrial sector. However, the mere presence of industry is not sufficient to transform a settlement into a genuine town for which an essential role is delegated to the tertiary sector. In the view of Lajos Tímár (GERMUSKA 2002a.) firstly, it is necessary for a properly stratified urban community to possess an employment market fit for all the diverse functions of a town, and secondly, those working in services support the gradual appearance of urban functions. He claims that the communist-built towns were not genuine urban, since that segment was not present in the local community which could serve as its most formative element.

The **fourth** major attribute is that in the communist-built towns' urban traditions were either very weak or nonexistent. (BELUSZKY 1999.) The 'socialist' towns were rootless; they lacked the traditional urban citizenry and social stratification, while the existing infrastructure and institutional background were inadequate as well. The development of a more cosmopolitan set of values could not materialize due to the novelty of these towns. These communities absorbed migrants from varied, though mainly agricultural backgrounds which greatly impacted the developing local values and norms in its own peculiar manner.

The new housing estates were often unable to preserve and maintain the old communal structures or to create new lasting bonds among the new residents, thus promoting social integration. As a further aggravation, the inadequacy of the town centres and the lack of organic wholeness among the diverse parts of these towns jeopardized their successful urbanization.

The **fifth** trait which applied to the communist-built industrial towns was a sustained population growth for a long period of time. Between 1949 and 1990 the population of 'socialist' towns in Hungary increased on average sixfold, whereas all other towns excluding the capital only by 40%. (GERMUSKA 2003a.)

Summarizing the main features of the communist-built industrial towns, nevertheless, did not provide an adequate answer as to what qualifies them to be referred to as genuine towns. As we have seen in the chapter dealing with spatial development in Hungary during the communist era, urban development and the attainment of the status of a town depended on a recommendation by the Presidential Council of the state. The title of a town also carried special consideration and additional financing which clearly benefitted urbanization and the development various distinct sub-units within larger urban communities.

By the 1980s, this urban setting had changed and there appeared new income based spatial divisions reflecting the socio-economic status of their inhabitants because of the spatial development concepts and the transforming economic conditions.

The current study aimed to offer a brief survey on the development spans of European and Hungarian communist built industrial towns. The importance of this topic is further accentuated by the ongoing transformation of towns in which urban heritage may be a dominant factor in shaping of the urban landscape, development policies and spatial adjustments. The second important factor is that there is a considerable divergence between the domestic and European urban development models. Such a phenomenon can be attributed to the varied settlement planning and politico-economic systems during the cold war; yet also to the diverse western and eastern development models and to the types of development projects they supported. Conversely, this means that there are discernible deviations based on former cold war allegiances until today, despite contemporary development paths which seem to materialize uniformly in urban development schemes.

The present work comprises of the description of the various models with their distinctive traits and similarities focusing on the issue of how sustainable are the spontaneous, forced, and advised forms of urban development in our contemporary world.

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